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| **Religious Issues in Your Childs Public School** A Guide for Jewish Parents A Publication of the Anti-Defamation League http://archive.adl.org/issue\_education/guide\_parents/print.html |
| This online publication has been created to help parents deal effectively with the challenges of religion in their children's public schools because no child should ever be made to feel like a stranger in his or her classroom.  The Anti-Defamation League, which was established in 1913 "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people...and to secure justice and fair treatment to all citizens alike," regards a strong separation between church and state as essential to preserve and promote religious rights and liberties. In our increasingly pluralistic society, ADL builds bridges of communication, understanding and respect among diverse groups and provides guidance to educators on issues such as school prayer, Bible clubs and the challenges of religion in the public schools. The questions presented here are actual situations our staff has helped parents resolve.  **Chanukah**  **Q. My child’s teacher asked me to present Chanukah to the class. What is legal and appropriate?**  A. It sounds like the teacher is laying the groundwork for Lisa to feel special in a positive way, while simultaneously providing all of the students with an understanding that religious differences are to be appreciated, not rejected. It is also admirable that she asked you to present to the class, rather than placing the responsibility on your daughter. The basic guideline you need to remember is that the public schools can teach about religion as long as they do not preach religion. Adults -- whether they are teachers, administrators, community leaders or parents -- must be careful to distinguish between teaching about a religious holiday and actually celebrating that holiday.   **Q. Should a teacher ask students to explain their religious holidays to their classes?**  A. It is always problematic when students are put on the spot and asked to explain a religious or cultural tradition: they may feel uncomfort-able and may not have sufficient information to be accurate. In asking a student to explain, the teacher also sends a message that Chanukah is too "exotic" for anyone but Jews to understand. There are many great books on Chanukah that the teacher can consult in order to be prepared to explain the holiday.   **Q. What is excessive when it comes to Christmas decorations on handouts and in the classroom?**  A. First, it is important to note that while Christmas trees, Santas, wreaths, wrapped gifts, and reindeer are commonly used as Christmas decorations or symbols, the courts have decided that they are secular symbols of the season. Nevertheless, their inordinate usage is inappropriate. Talk to the teacher about the plethora of Christmas decorations on the homework assignments. Explain that while you understand that displaying such graphics on workbook assignments is legal, such excessive use makes you and your child feel uncomfort-able. Suggest alternative winter decorations, including snow flakes, gingerbread houses, and mittens that may be more inclusive.   **Q. Is it appropriate for teachers to hold Christmas parties and to allow those who don’t observe to be excused?**  A. The students are being told, in effect, "Come to a fun party with gifts, food, and games, or go to the library for the afternoon." While legal, this party is insensitive to those students who do not celebrate Christmas. With a few adjustments, this party can be a positive experience for all of the students. Instead of celebrating Christmas, the party can celebrate the winter season or a variety of holidays. In addition to having Santa Claus pictures to color, there should also be non-holiday coloring choices. Finally, since receiving gifts from Santa Claus is a Christian tradition, it is inappropriate in the public school classroom. An option that is true to the spirit of the winter holidays might be encouraging children to write to merchants, or other children, seeking donations for children who lack any toys.   **Q. Is it appropriate for a teacher to assign compositions with religious themes such as "What Christmas Means to Me"?**  A. The teacher's assignment assumes that all children find Christmas meaningful. This is inappropriate because it appears to endorse one religion over another. It is illegal for the teacher, who is an authority figure, to demonstrate a preference for any particular religion. I suggest that you use the situation to increase the teacher's sensitivity to religious diversity and to stress the importance of assigning topics that allow children to choose between a variety of secular and religious projects, i.e., "What Does Christmas/Chanukah/Kwanzaa/Winter Mean to You?"  It is important to remember, however, that there may be a legal difference between an assignment initiated by the teacher and a topic selected voluntarily by a student.    **Q How do I tell if a holiday concert is promoting a particular religion?**  A. To check the program's constitution-ality, you need to determine whether there is a balance between the secular and the religious selections. If the music is part of a program that is primarily secular and educational, it is legal. If it seems to be promoting a single religion, suggest to the teacher that this might be a good opportunity to provide recognition of the holidays observed by non-Christian children. It is as important to remind her that she needs to ensure the comfort of the child who comes from a home where no religion is practiced, or the child whose religion teaches that celebrating any holiday is wrong. Offer to help by sharing appropriate songs. The criteria for selecting the music should be on the basis of its musical and educational value, rather than its religious context.  If the teacher declines to change the program, remember that Eric can be excused without penalty from participating in programming that violates his religious beliefs, but this may ban him from the fun others are having. Is the teacher aware of the sensibilities of those children who are not "on Santa's list"?  You may want to contact the local office of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). The League has helped many school districts develop policies which are constitutional and help school staff be both inclusive and sensitive to the beliefs or non-beliefs of all students and staff. You may want to provide ADL's 2000 publication, Religion in the Public Schools: Guidelines for a Growing and Changing Phenomenon, to the school principal as a first step in encouraging the school to rethink what may have become unexamined custom.   **Q. Is it acceptable for a public school administrator to decorate his office with a Christmas tree and a nativity scene?**  A. You have the challenge of communicating two messages. First, you need to let the principal know that, while you understand and respect his beliefs, displaying a nativity scene on school grounds is illegal since it is an unambiguous religious symbol. In order to maintain the legal separation of church and state, he, in his role as school principal, cannot appear to favor one religion over another or create an environment in which students may feel that he harbors a particular bias that may color his decisions in his role as school authority figure. His office should be a comfortable location for students of all beliefs or no religious beliefs.  As for the tree, its religious symbolism is not as clear. Symbols of religious holidays that have acquired secular meaning, such as Christmas trees, may be permissible. Perhaps you could suggest that they include other holiday and seasonal symbols along with the Christmas tree and you may want to offer to bring in some to share. The festive atmosphere of the season can be enhanced when it reflects the beliefs of all of the students.   **Passover**  **Q. My child’s teacher asked me to present Passover to the class. What is legal and appropriate?**  A. You have been presented with a wonderful opportunity. Your own goals for this presentation are many. First, you can broaden their knowledge about Jewish traditions. Second, you can link the slavery experiences of Jews in Egypt and of Africans in the Americas. Third, you can expand their art history knowledge. Finally, you can contribute to their valuing the importance of women in history.   **Policies on Religion in the Public Schools**  **Q. How can a parent advisory board reach consensus on developing guidelines for religious holidays at school?**  A. This is a chance to make a real difference at your school. Your group has framed the challenge your school faces in terms of legitimate perspectives that need to be considered in crafting a policy. Include representatives from each of the groups in the decision making process. Consider scheduling an open council session or a town meeting so that all concerned parents can voice their opinions. Begin with some ground rules that ensure the council members and the audience know that everyone will be heard and respected. Your school district may already have developed a written policy outlining what is permitted and what is encouraged. If such a policy does not exist, a number of civil rights groups would be happy to be of service. The Anti-Defamation League, for example, has collected sample policies on religion in the schools that may save you the trouble of re-inventing the wheel. Go to www.adl.org on the Web and call your nearest office.  U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley distributed a number of documents to all of the nation's public schools in Fall 1999. They included "A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools" and "Teaching about Religion in American Life" that have been published by the First Amendment Center with the endorsement of a broad range of educational and religious groups. These documents can be obtained by calling 1-800-830-3733 or at www.freedomforum.org.   **Q. Is it ever appropriate for a student to lead a prayer at a school function, like graduation?**  A. The basic principle, reaffirmed a most recently in Doe vs. Santa Fe Independent School District, is that schools must avoid school-sponsored religious activities, including prayer at graduation and at football games. This area of the law is changing rapidly, so encourage the principal to check with her district's legal counsel or ADL for assistance.   **Religious Clubs**  **Q. What are the guidelines regarding students praying together publicly or having religious clubs at public high schools?**  A. Students are free to pray alone or in groups as long as the activity is student initiated and does not disrupt other students or compromise their learning environment. The prayer gatherings at the flagpole are legal, and if the school has no policy against distributing fliers, then the distribution is okay also. Remember that teachers and administrators are not allowed to join the flagpole prayers. Since your children are feeling uncomfortable and pressured to join the prayers, please contact the principal to make her aware that other students are feeling socially pressured to join the prayers at the flagpole.  As to your question regarding the religious clubs, the Supreme Court has declared that the Equal Access Act is constitutional. That means if there are any non-curricular clubs permitted on the secondary school campus, e.g., a Chess Club, then a Christian Club is also permissible. Your child is free, therefore, to start a Jewish Club. Remember that the act has been interpreted as being applicable in secondary schools only and only applies to student-initiated, student-led clubs.  **Classroom Concerns**  **Q. Can public schools require students to read religious texts such as the Bible?**  A. This is an area where it is important to differentiate between teaching religion and teaching about religion. It is also important to distinguish between a literature course focusing on the Bible as literature (its language and major stories) and the Bible in literature (how writers have used Biblical language and stories to create memorable allusions). It is appropriate for students to discuss biblical literature as a part of our literary and ethical teachings, but not as religious doctrine. If the teacher presents religious experiences with respect and is inclusive of a variety of religions and reminds the students that there is no single Bible (the Hebrew Scriptures differs from the various Christian Old and New Testaments), this can be a worthwhile learning experience.   **Q. What should be done if there is bias against Judaism in the text or by the teacher when the study of religion is part of the curriculum?**  A. Let's presume that this teacher has crossed the line unwittingly between teaching about religion and proselytizing. Make an appointment to meet with her and explain that when a teacher implies that one religion is superior to others, it causes children who are of another religion or who are of no religion to feel inferior. Proselytizing violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and is illegal.  For many years, textbooks avoided the subject of religion, deeming it too controversial. Recently, textbook publishers have begun to include the role that religion has played in the human experience because some scholars have asserted that the omission of religion leaves gaping holes in history. Moreover, some parents feared that entirely eliminating religion denies their children the moral foundation that they need to become responsible citizens.  Teaching about religion is still a relatively new subject, and many teachers have received no training on how to deal with religion in the classroom in a way that neither promotes nor denigrates religion. There are excellent resources available to help teachers avoid these pitfalls. ADL offers free classes for educators on "Teaching About Religion in the Public Schools" and the First Amendment Center publishes, A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools.  Parents and teachers should collaborate on expectations for children's behavior. There is a general consensus that certain values such as kindness, personal responsibility, and honesty should be promoted in schools. But religious education must be left as the province of the parents.   **Q. What should be done if a teacher tries to restrict the wearing of religious jewelry such as a Magen David (Star of David)?**  A. You need to find out why the teacher is concerned about your daughter's necklace. Are students allowed to wear crosses? Does the teacher know what the Magen David is? In the past, Jewish stars have been mistaken as Satanic symbols or gang symbols. Does the school have a dress code that forbids jewelry? Even if it does, this dress code may not hold up against a free exercise right unless the school can demonstrate a compelling interest. If the school does not have a prohibition against jewelry, the teacher might be concerned because the student has been harassed by other students about it. Talk to your daughter and find out if classmates have asked her about the Magen David and what she has discussed with them. Encourage her to tell you if anyone ever teases her or harasses her about the necklace. If the teacher is concerned because it marks the student as "different," encourage the teacher to help her students value the differences among their classmates. A wonderful in-service and curricular program for her to consider is ADL's A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE®Institute which provides resources and strategies that demonstrate that differences should be respected, not hidden.   **Q. What can parents do about student attendance policies that penalize absences, if those absences are for religious observance?**  A. In many schools, perfect attendance awards reward just that ­ perfect attendance. Therefore, students who are absent because of serious illness, religious observance, or funeral attendance are ineligible. Many schools have made adaptations to the award that you might suggest to your school. Some schools offer a monthly award for perfect attendance, thereby allowing students who need to miss a school day one month to win the award the next month. Another variation on the theme is to offer an award for perfect attendance first semester and another for second semester. Finally, a handful of schools have redefined "perfect" attendance to allow for two or three absences or less. This not only allows Jewish students some leeway with regard to the Holy Days, but also ensures that sick children stay home rather than infecting the class and the teacher. There are times when we need to explain to our children that sometimes two good things (following the dictates of our religious practice and obtaining recognition in school) are in conflict. You may want to assure them that there are other ways of gaining recognition in school that you would be proud of their obtaining.   **Q. What can parents do if their school's physical education uniforms conflict with their consideration of appropriate modesty?**  A. First, find out if there are other clothes that can be worn that are more modest. If the school allows none of these, sit down with the physical education teacher and the principal and discuss your concerns. Many administrators are concerned that if they allow one student to wear different clothes, this will open the door to other student requests. Explain to the school that your daughter isn't making a frivolous request, but that your religion mandates this accommodation. While the school may have a legitimate health and safety interest in having students exercise in specified clothes, your daughter's free exercise of religion interest will most likely prevail.   **Resources**   Kolatch, Alfred J., The Jewish Book of Why, Middle Village (NY): Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1981   Mandelkern, Nicolas D. & Weber, Vicki L., The Jewish Holiday Home Companion: Parents' Guide to Family Celebration. West Orange (NJ): Berhrman House, 1994   Nathan, Joan. The Children's Jewish Holiday Kitchen. New York: Schocken Books, 1995   Schecter, Ellen. The Family Haggadah. New York: Viking: Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 1999.   Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History. New York: William Morrow & Co, 1991   Zalben, Jane Breskin. Pearl's Eight Days of Chanukah. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998. |